

On Žižek on Quantum Physics and Philosophy (12 December 2025)

[I became a Philosophy major as an undergrad when I discovered (abruptly, in a 5-week summer course on integral calculus) that I didn't have a basic understanding of, or feel for, mathematics needed to continue meaningfully majoring in the Physics major I had signed up for on entering U Toledo in the fall of 1958.

Philosophy seemed like the obvious course since my interest in becoming an astrophysicist had little to do with engineering (as I confirmed with a brief stint as an Engineering Physics major) but with theoretical physics, physics in an ideational sense — which is to say, precisely, philosophy.

I fell into the romantic glow, ready to sit at the feet of the great thinkers, to walk with the masters through the inner chambers of the Academy, in the gardens of the Lyceum, on the steps of the Stoa.

Of course, it wasn't the whole sweep of the subject that drew my interest. As I learned in Introduction to Philosophy, my bent was not toward Ethics, Aesthetics and Logic (though aspects of those have engaged me to greater or lesser extent since those heady days), but toward Metaphysics and Ontology, Cosmology and (inevitably, given that I was living in the era of the "linguistic turn" in the humanities), Epistemology.

The so-called human sciences were novel subjects in many US colleges in those days. Courses in Psychology and Sociology (basic Freud and statistical demography, respectively) had only recently been added to the TU curriculum, Anthropology — especially Cultural Anthropology and such an obscure field as Folklore (two fields that I became increasingly interested in my academic trajectory) — weren't yet there. But I was fortunate to discover History, in particular a course in the History of Ideas (an historical concept itself these days, largely replaced, as has Philosophy itself been, by various aspects of some many-headed something called Theory).

But Metaphysics was where I landed, Ontology with all the cosmological, historical (and "spiritual"/theological) trimmings. Which is why for the past quarter century or so I've spent a great deal of intellectual (and ipso facto emotional) energy on trying to understand the postmodernist interrogation of those hoary subjects. And why, despite my finding much of his "rock star philosopher" style disagreeable) I continue to find Žižek worth reading — this piece in particular because it deals with those two main topics, Ontology and Physics, and for good measure takes a brief look at two major subtexts of my own historico-philosophical concerns: 1) the eagerness with which the idealist-inclined since, and before, Plato have seized upon gaps in naturalist-scientific knowledge to promote immaterialist (often wishful eschatological) notions, and 2) the too-often ignored relation between people's politics and the metaphysical (ideological, spiritual, doctrinal, religious) beliefs underpinning them.

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Žižek: "Quantum physics needs philosophy but shouldn't trust philosophers who appropriate your

work for obscurantist purposes"

"many quantum physicists have taken refuge in esoteric spiritualism or direct subjective idealism.
...

Lacan knew what he was saying when he claimed that quantum mechanics is the first science that deals with the Real . . . as distinct from the symbolically constituted reality. The whole point of quantum mechanics is that there is another level of being which obeys laws different from our ordinary reality At this quantum level, our standard notion of time and space as universal containers of all reality must also be abandoned.

To interpret this quantum domain as the final refutation of materialism and as proof that reality is spiritual succeeds only if we restrict ourselves to the classic deterministic notion of reality—small material particles jumping around in all-encompassing space and time. . . .

the notion of materialism has to be radically rethought after quantum physics. . . .

recall the well-known Theodor Adorno's analysis of the antagonistic character of the notion of society: at first glance, the split between the two notions of society (the Anglo-Saxon individualistic-nominalistic notion, which emerges through the interaction of individuals, and the Durkheimian organicist notion of society as a totality that preexists individuals) seems irreducible. We seem to be dealing with a true Kantian antinomy, which cannot be resolved via a higher synthesis and which elevates society into an inaccessible Thing-in-itself. However, one should merely take note of how this radical antinomy, which seems to preclude our access to the Thing, ALREADY IS THE THING ITSELF—the essential feature of today's society IS the irreconcilable antagonism between Totality and the individual."

- Slavoj Zizek

<https://open.substack.com/pub/slavoj/p/quantum-physics-needs-philosophy-ca1>